

# When Philadelphia Was the Capital of Jewish America

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The Making of an American Jewish Culture

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Culture, Vytautas Kavolis reminds us, is not randomly and evenly distributed. Historically, "in each nation or international civilization, periods of increasing or declining creativity . . . may be identified." There have been golden ages in the history of culture, and there have been dark ages, eras of cultural renewal and eras of cultural stagnation.<sup>1</sup>

Jewish cultural life in Philadelphia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries falls somewhere between these two extremes. It does not compare to Viennese culture during the same period, but one can, nevertheless, identify a period of extraordinary cultural ferment and institutional reorganization within the community that had considerable implications for Jewish cultural life throughout the United States. To borrow a phrase from Frederic Morton, the Jewish cultural leaders of Philadelphia, members of the Philadelphia Group, were men who created "not industries, but climates; men who brewed the very weather of our minds today."<sup>2</sup> Working in their home city or in neighboring cities (New York, Baltimore, Washington, D.C.), sometimes laboring alone and sometimes in conjunction with non-Philadelphians, they created the basic institutions, characteristics, and standards of twentieth-century American Jewish cultural life reaching almost to contemporary times.

Philadelphia's role in American Jewish cultural life dates far back into the nineteenth century. Individuals like Isaac Leeser and Rebecca Gratz, along with institutions like the Hebrew Sunday School Society, the first Jewish Publication Society, and the Hebrew Education Society, amply illustrate the community's early commitment to Jewish education, at least of a rudimentary sort. According to Bertram W. Korn, during this period Philadelphia served as "the ideal experimental center

of American Jewish creativity.”<sup>3</sup> The Jewish community was, to a surprising degree, involved in reading, writing, and learning.

Philadelphia as a whole is not generally known as a center of culture. “Proper Philadelphians,” according to E. Digby Baltzell, “have made almost no serious contributions to the history of the American mind.” While Boston Brahmins were “a reading and writing people,” their opposite numbers in Philadelphia, according to Baltzell, “were neither”—at least not in any comparable way. Indeed, John Lukacs describes the city as “almost indifferent to intellectual achievement.”<sup>4</sup> This may explain why local Jews came to fill this void, for in the absence of an entrenched Protestant cultural elite, they had the opportunity to rise and gain recognition. Over time, culture became one more vehicle for distinguishing Philadelphia Jews from their non-Jewish counterparts.

Yet for a brief period following the death of Isaac Leeser, in 1868, the cultural level of Philadelphia’s Jewish community sharply declined. Leeser’s periodical, the *Occident*, was maintained for a year by Mayer Sulzberger and then ended; thereafter, the city was without a local Jewish newspaper for six years. Maimonides College, founded in 1867 to train American rabbis and to wage what Leeser called “the great fight against ignorance,” lost its last students and disappeared at the end of 1872 or the beginning of 1873.<sup>5</sup> The Hebrew Education Society’s parochial school similarly declined, and then watched as many of its pupils, including young Cyrus Adler, moved over to the city’s improved public schools. In 1878, the society was forced to close its school altogether and to focus exclusively on supplementary Hebrew education of a more elementary kind.<sup>6</sup>

The only bright spot in this otherwise bleak picture was the formation of the Young Men’s Hebrew Association in 1875. This was the work of a younger generation of Philadelphia Jews: the first president was Mayer Sulzberger, age thirty-one; the president of the junior branch (ages 16–21) was Solomon Solis-Cohen, age eighteen. The new organization sought “to promote a higher culture among the young men, and to unite them in a liberal organization which shall tend to their moral, intellectual, and social improvement.”<sup>7</sup> Working closely with the New York YMHA, founded slightly earlier, the organization underscored the importance of *Jewish* cultural activities: it established lectures, literary discussions, and formal classes, opened up free Jewish libraries, and even laid plans to issue a series of Jewish books. One of the organization’s most notable achievements, in the late 1870s, was the “Grand Revival of the Jewish National Holiday of Chanucka,” complete with appropriate pageants and publicity. This was an effort to “rescue this national festival from the oblivion



Dinner tendered to Solomon Schecter, 29 May 1910. Courtesy of the Philadelphia Jewish Archives Center.

into which it seemed rapidly falling" and, presumably, to counteract the evident allure of Christmas. The triumphant success of the 1879 celebration overwhelmed even the organizers. "Every worker in the cause of a revived Judaism," one of them wrote, "must have felt the inspiration exuded from the enthusiastic interest evinced by such a mass of Israel's people."<sup>8</sup>

The reference here to "the cause of a revised Judaism" is the key, I think, to what transpired during the ensuing decades, a period of dramatic cultural awakening. In the late 1870s, a group of young people in Philadelphia and New York, the Philadelphians being particularly influential, came to believe, with all the audacity, enthusiasm, and fervor of their youth, that they, through their own efforts, could spark an American Jewish cultural revolution. Max Cohen, one of the New Yorkers in this group and later librarian of New York's Maimonides Library, wrote an impassioned letter on this subject to Solomon Solis-Cohen in Philadelphia in which he declared that "the great question for contemporary Judaism is whether it will continue God's work or cease to be." His own conclusion was unambiguous: "Israel must ever be whatever its children make it. . . . They who wish to give Israel her true position in the world's autonomy must set a high ideal before them and abide thereby." (Incidentally, Cohen, when he wrote this lofty letter, was all of twenty-six, and the last line of his letter reads "mother is calling that it is time to blow out my lamp."<sup>9</sup>)

The "high ideal" that that these young people set for themselves, talked about, and worked toward was Jewish religious and cultural renewal. In the *American Hebrew*, the influential New York Jewish newspaper that they founded in 1879 (with Solomon Solis-Cohen and former Philadelphian Cyrus Sulzberger on the editorial board, later joined by Cyrus Adler), they spoke of "untiring endeavors to stir up our brethren to pride in our time-honored faith, to incite them by all the means in our power to shed lustre on our ancestral fame." Privately, they used phrases like "the perpetuation and elevation of Judaism." Several had bound themselves to a solemn covenant "for God and Judaism" which they called *Keyam Dishmaya*, pledging to do all in their power to bring Jews back "to the ancient faith." In their opening *American Hebrew* editorial, they even expressed the triumphalistic hope that in the future America would be the field where the "daughter-religions" would make their way back to Judaism, "and a purified Judaism extend the maternal greeting of love and forgetfulness of ill, to the disintegrating sects of Christendom."<sup>10</sup>

What is fascinating is that many of those connected as young adults with the YMHA and the *American Hebrew*, particularly Philadel-

phians like Mayer Sulzberger, Cyrus Adler, and Solomon Solis-Cohen, maintained their heady enthusiasm, and continued throughout their lives to labor on behalf of these self-same goals. In the space of a few decades they helped to establish a whole series of new Jewish cultural institutions in Philadelphia and New York: notably, the Jewish Theological Seminary (1886), Jewish Publication Society (1888), American Jewish Historical Society (1892), Gratz College (1893), Jewish Chautauqua Society (1893), and Dropsie College (1907). They were associated with the *Jewish Encyclopedia* (1901-1906), the movement to bring Solomon Schechter to America (he arrived in 1902), the transfer to America's shores of the *Jewish Quarterly Review* (1910), and the establishment of American Jewry's first high-quality Hebrew Press (1921). They were also involved in the Jewish Bible translation project (1893-1917) and the Schiff Library of Jewish Classics (1914-1936), both specially funded projects of the Jewish Publication Society.

These highly ambitious and for the most part successful undertakings were all geared to different audiences: some to scholars, some to rabbis and teachers, and some to the Jewish community at large and to non-Jews. In the case of Cyrus Adler, Naomi W. Cohen describes this multitiered cultural agenda as a conscious creation:

On one level, Adler envisioned the modern training of Jewish scholars, abetted by appropriate library and publication resources. On a second, he aimed for the education of American rabbis and teachers who would inculcate a loyalty to historical Judaism in consonance with acculturation to American surroundings. On still a third, he worked for a community knowledgeable about its heritage, that would appreciate the value of reading books of Jewish interest, of collecting Jewish artifacts, and of keeping alert to contemporary events that involved Jewry.<sup>11</sup>

What these levels all had in common was the fact that they were dedicated to the same general ends. All sought to promote religious renewal, improved Jewish education, cultural revitalization, the professionalization of Jewish scholarship, the promotion of a positive Jewish image to the Gentiles, and the elevation of American Jewry to a position of greater prominence, if not preeminence among the Jews of the world.

Admittedly, the challenge posed by massive East European Jewish immigration led, for a time, to a greater rhetorical emphasis upon Americanization as a goal, but this should not be exaggerated. Promoters of Jewish culture understood better than other Jewish leaders did that the real concern was not so much how to assimilate the East Europeans, as how to ensure that all American Jews would not

assimilate completely. It was this critical insight coupled with a prescient sense that American Jewry needed to prepare itself to play a central role in the affairs of world Jewry that prompted Philadelphia Jews to participate in the creation of these great institutions and projects that shaped American Jewish cultural life into the late twentieth century.<sup>12</sup>

Two characteristics of this turn-of-the-century cultural "revolution" are particularly important, for they serve to distinguish the cultural activities of the Philadelphia Group and their allies from the earlier work of what might be termed the Cincinnati Group: Isaac Mayer Wise, Max Lilienthal, and their associates. These characteristics, with some exaggeration, may be summed up in two negatives: the Philadelphians were not Reform, and they were not rabbis.

Broadly speaking, the Cincinnatians, led by Isaac Mayer Wise, believed that some variety of Reform Judaism would inevitably become *Minhag Amerika*, the universal custom of American Jews. As a result, the pathbreaking cultural activities that they undertook—the *American Israelite*, the establishment of Hebrew Union College, the books published by Bloch Publishing Company, the short-lived *Hebrew Review*, and others, all reflected the Reform Jewish perspective. The Cincinnatians may have believed that they were promoting the "union of all Israel," but in fact, and not necessarily consciously, they were advocating union on their own terms: terms that most members of the Philadelphia Group could not abide.<sup>13</sup>

By contrast, the Philadelphians—at least those caught up in the spirit of religious revival described earlier—saw Reform as part of the problem, not part of the solution. They were, as one of their numbers recalled years later, "young American Jews who, although not inordinately addicted to Orthodoxy as a rigid standardization of thought and conduct, were yet opposed to the wholesale and reckless discarding of everything that was Jewish simply because it was inconvenient, oriental, or was not in conformity with Episcopalian customs."<sup>14</sup> They thought that Reform had carried its program of change much too far and believed that what American Jewry needed was a more conservative approach, a return to tradition. As a result, all of their cultural projects, although formally undertaken in the spirit of Jewish consensus and often with notable Reform Jews participating, nevertheless carried with them an undertone (and sometimes more) of anti-Reform animus. This comes through most clearly, of course, in the anti-Reform polemic of Moses Dropsie, entitled *On Deform in Judaism* (1895), but it may also be seen in the personal correspondence of people like Mayer Sulzberger and Cyrus Adler. It was pronounced within the portals of the Jewish Theological Seminary and only thinly

veiled at Dropsie College. It was even discernible in the outwardly more pluralistic world of the Jewish Publication Society. Indeed, on at least one occasion, Cyrus Adler and Solomon Schechter actively conspired to keep the Reform Movement down, rigging the board of the Schiff Library of Jewish Classics to ensure that the "Reform element" would not have a "preponderating vote."<sup>15</sup>

The other cultural characteristic mentioned above, Philadelphia Jewry's pronounced anticlericalism, may come as somewhat more of a surprise, particularly given Jerold Auerbach's recent claim that until late in the nineteenth century, "the voice of American Judaism was the voice of its rabbis."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, it seems to me that, in contradistinction to Cincinnati, the key individuals behind Jewish culture developments in Philadelphia were, with a few exceptions, well-educated lay leaders, not rabbis.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, at the founding of the Jewish Publication Society in 1888, and four years later when the American Jewish Historical Society was founded in New York, rabbis were initially excluded from leadership roles.<sup>18</sup> Rabbi Marcus Jastrow of Philadelphia, one of those excluded, discerned what he thought to be an almost "instinctive" American Jewish fear of "clerical rule."<sup>19</sup> Moreover, local rabbis were forever being faulted by lay leaders, publicly and privately, for their alleged foreignness, ignorance, pomposity, and most of all for their inability to work together for the sake of the Jewish community.<sup>20</sup> Whereas in Cincinnati, rabbis like Isaac Mayer Wise, Max Lilienthal, and later David Philipson were the symbolic leaders of the Jewish community, in Philadelphia, according to Aaron Friedenwald writing in 1888, "there seemed to be but one opinion prevailing about the rabbis and it was not a very flattering one."<sup>21</sup> Not surprisingly, then, Dropsie College, chartered in 1907, was nonprofessional and nonsectarian; it was a school for training Jewish scholars rather than rabbis. This reflected the Philadelphia view that learned laymen and professional scholars, rather than rabbis, should stand at the center of Jewish communal and cultural life.

Admittedly, there are some exceptions to these generalizations, notably Sabato Morais, Joseph Krauskopf, and Henry Berkowitz. But it is interesting that Morais, minister of Mikveh Israel, eschewed the title rabbi and consciously set himself apart from his colleagues; his first love was known to be scholarship.<sup>22</sup> As for Krauskopf and Berkowitz, Reform rabbis and also brothers-in-law, they stood outside of the mainstream and both ended up creating their own organizations, the Farm School and Chautauqua, where they could be insiders, and more highly respected.<sup>23</sup>

The Jewish leaders of the "Philadelphia Group," in concert with others, helped to shape the cultural standards of twentieth-century

American Jews. Through the institutions they created, particularly the Jewish Publication Society, they functioned as cultural gatekeepers, requiring that works of culture conform to certain unwritten guidelines in order to receive approval. Four of these guidelines proved particularly significant and shed light on American Jewish cultural life as a whole.<sup>24</sup>

First and foremost, these leaders believed that works of Jewish culture should be broadly educational. Heirs to nineteenth-century liberal Jewish thought, to the educational ideas of European Jewish scholarship, and to Victorian didacticism, they extolled education, here somewhat akin to the German *bildung*,<sup>25</sup> as a kind of panacea, a cure for everything from anti-Semitism to assimilation. They therefore sought, through cultural activities, to combat "ignorance from within and prejudice from without."<sup>26</sup> The idea that culture should be provocative or subversive would have been utterly foreign to their minds.

Second, they attempted, through works of culture, to promote a sense of Jewish unity. However much they argued among themselves over religious and other issues, they nevertheless championed the idea of a unified Jewish cultural tradition, rooted in history, ideas, values, and sacred texts, that linked American Jews one to another, as well as backward through time. This article of faith—the belief that a shared cultural tradition underlay American Jewish life—reflected a noble ideal that still inspires American Jews today. But the cost was high, for it necessarily entailed a stifling of dissent and a willful disregard for the day-to-day reality of Jewish divisiveness.

Third, they insisted that all works of American Jewish culture conform to the highest standards of dignity and propriety. Culture, they thought, needed to be pure and elevating; it should demonstrate how refined Jews had become, and thus project a positive Jewish image to the world. The *American Hebrew*, for example, refused any illustrations that were "in the least degree indelicate," and banned any social advertisements, cards of matrimonial brokers and, in the early years, even jokes.<sup>27</sup> The Jewish Publication Society held to equally strict standards and periodically asked authors to rewrite (or "wash") their works in order to make them acceptable for publication.<sup>28</sup> Again, the underlying sense here was that culture should reflect high-minded ideals rather than sordid reality. The result, unsurprisingly, was that Jewish culture often seemed woefully out of touch with the times.

Fourth, and last, promoters of American Jewish culture demanded that everything they supported be fervently patriotic, particularly in wartime. This evident and sometimes exaggerated emphasis on America is easy to understand. American Jews, like Jews in other

Western countries and like many other American immigrant groups, felt compelled to go to great lengths to prove their loyalty and patriotism, particularly when these were so frequently being called into question by nativists and anti-Semites alike. American Jews also had the additional problem of having to earn the respect of their European cousins who viewed them as cultural barbarians. The perennial emphasis on America and its virtues thus made sense on two grounds: It evidenced allegiance, and it publicized American Jewish achievements. But if culture played an important apologetic function by promoting loyalty and helping to beat down negative stereotypes, it did so at a price. American Jewish culture was, as a result, more sterile and conformist than might otherwise have been the case.

This, then, is the mixed legacy of the Philadelphia Group: it simultaneously promoted American Jewish culture and restrained it from developing freely. On balance, it seems to me that the positive cultural achievements that were attained largely outweigh the negatives. Certainly, American Jewish cultural life as we know it—the great cultural institutions of Philadelphia and New York, the remarkable libraries, the hundreds of thousands of Jewishly learned books and periodicals, and at least two generations of American Jewish scholars—all owe an incalculable debt to the young visionary Jews of a century past who, whatever their shortcomings, took it upon themselves to revitalize Jewish culture in America and, after a lifetime of effort, succeeded.

## Notes

1. Vytautas Kavolis, *History on Art's Side: Social Dynamics in Artistic Efflorescences* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1971), p. 1.
2. Frederic Morton, *A Nervous Splendor: Vienna 1888/1889* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979), p. viii.
3. As quoted in Murray Friedman, ed., *Jewish Life in Philadelphia 1830-1940* (Philadelphia: ISHI Publications, 1983), p. 5.
4. E. Digby Baltzell, *Puritan Boston and Quaker Philadelphia* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1979), pp. 285, 291; idem, *Philadelphia Gentlemen* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1979 [orig. ed., 1958]), pp. 152-57; John Lukacs, *Philadelphia: Patricians and Philistines 1900-1950* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981), p. 39.
5. Bertram W. Korn, *Eventful Years and Experiences* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1954), pp. 151-214, esp. 165, 177. A Jewish newspaper named *The Index* appeared in 1872, but it quickly expired. *The Jewish Record* commenced publication in April 1875.
6. Menahem G. Glenn, "Rabbi Sabato Morais' Report on the Hebrew Education Society of Philadelphia," *Essays in American Jewish History* (Cincinnati: American Jewish Archives, 1978), pp. 407-24; Henry S. Morais, *The Jews of Philadelphia*

(Philadelphia, 1894), pp. 154–56; Diane A. King, “Jewish Education in Philadelphia,” in Friedman (ed.) *Jewish Life in Philadelphia*, p. 242; cf. Cyrus Adler, *I Have Considered the Days* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1941) pp. 14–15.

7. Morais, *Jews of Philadelphia*, p. 164.

8. For full documentation, see Jonathan D. Sarna, *JPS: The Americanization of Jewish Culture, 1888–1988* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), p. 15, from where this paragraph is drawn. See also Jonathan D. Sarna, “Is Judaism Compatible with American Civil Religion? The Problem of Christmas and the ‘National Faith,’” in Rowland A. Sherrill, ed., *Religion and the Life of the Nation: American Recoveries* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), esp. p. 162.

9. Max Cohen to Solomon Solis-Cohen, 14 October 1879, Solomon Solis-Cohen Archives, Collection of Helen S-C Sax and Hayes Solis Cohen, Jr., Philadelphia, Penn.

10. *American Hebrew*, 21 November 1879, p. 3 reprinted in Philip Cowen, *Memoirs of an American Jew* (New York, 1932), p. 55; Max Cohen to Solomon Solis-Cohen (10 November 1879), Solomon Solis-Cohen Archives; Sarna, *JPS*, p. 15; Yehezkel Wyszowski, “The American Hebrew: An Exercise in Ambivalence,” *American Jewish History* 76:3 (March 1987), pp. 340–53.

11. Naomi W. Cohen, “Introduction,” in Ira Robinson, ed., *Cyrus Adler: Selected Letters* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1985), 1, p. xxx.

12. Cf. Sarna, *JPS*, pp. 13–20.

13. On the centrality of Reform Judaism in Cincinnati, see Jonathan D. Sarna and Nancy H. Klein, *The Jews of Cincinnati* (Cincinnati: Center for the Study of the American Jewish Experience, 1989), esp. pp. 12–14, 86, 88. Joseph Krauskopf, “Half a Century of Judaism in the United States,” *American Jews Annual* (Cincinnati, 1888), pp. 65ff reflects the Cincinnatians’ pro-Reform view; for Mayer Sulzberger’s response, see Sarna, *JPS*, pp. 18 and 302, n. 47.

14. Max Cohen, “Introduction,” to Alexander Kohut, *The Ethics of the Fathers* (New York, 1920), p. 7.

15. Moses A. Dropsie, *On Deform in Judaism and on the Study of Hebrew* (Philadelphia, 1895); Robert E. Fierstien, *A Different Spirit: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1886–1902* (New York, 1990); Abraham A. Neuman, “Dropsie College for Hebrew and Cognate Learning,” *Universal Jewish Encyclopedia* 3 (1941), pp. 600–602; Sarna, *JPS*, p. 55.

16. Jerold S. Auerbach, *Rabbis and Lawyers: The Journey from Torah to Constitution* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), p. 93.

17. A surprising number of them were also lifelong bachelors, including Moses Dropsie, Samuel Elkin, Simon Gratz, Isaac Leiser, Simon Muhr, and Mayer Sulzberger. Charles Rosenberg notes that male celibacy was a Victorian ideal, see his *No Other Gods* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), pp. 71–88.

18. Sarna, *JPS*, pp. 20–21; “Organization of the American Jewish Historical Society . . . On Monday the Seventh Day of June 1892” (typescript, American Jewish Historical Society), esp. pp. 58, 61; Nathan M. Kaganoff, “AJHS at 90: Reflections on the History of the Oldest Ethnic Historical Society in America,” *AJH* 71 (June 1982), pp. 473–74.

19. “Organization of the American Jewish Historical Society . . .,” p. 64.

20. Sarna, *JPS*, p. 22 and works cited on p. 302, n. 37.

21. Quoted in Alexandra Lee Levin, “The Beginnings of the Jewish Publication Society” (typescript, 1964), in box 14, Edwin Wolf 2nd Papers, Philadelphia Jewish Archives, p. 4.

22. Moshe Davis, *The Emergence of Conservative Judaism* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1965), p. 355; Sarna, *JPS*, p. 21.

23. Malcolm H. Stern, “National Leaders of Their Time: Philadelphia’s Reform Rabbis,” in Friedman, ed., *Jewish Life in Philadelphia*, pp. 185–94.

24. What follows is adapted from Sarna, *JPS*, pp. 88–91, where other primary sources are cited.

25. See George L. Mosse, *German Jews Beyond Judaism* (Bloomington and Cincinnati: Indiana University Press and Hebrew Union College Press, 1985).

26. Simon Miller, “President’s Address,” *American Jewish Year Book* 25 (1923–24), p. 440.

27. Cowen, *Memoirs of an American Jew*, pp. 46–47.

28. Sarna, *JPS*, pp. 90, 212–14.